



Making the River

By J.Octavian.R, lake nebagamon, WI

Diary of Thomas Warren: July 27, 1864 I crouched behind the large willow that overlooked the woodland down the hill, and let my breath come in halting gasps. Cool and soft breezes brushed over me, caressing my skin. My eyes roved around the surroundings, alert for trouble. In each flutter of feathers I heard musket fire and the shouts of my pursuers. Kneeling, I tore strips of cloth from my tattered pants and wound them around my bare feet. I made each movement slowly and deliberately, letting my strength return.

After I had regained my breath, I stood and made a beeline for the glimmering water in the distance. If I could make the river, I could float downstream to camp; if I made it to the river, I would live.

Hearing a commotion, I looked behind me. Far up the hill I could see the flash of a blue uniform. They had followed me. Splinters flew from a tree five feet to my right. A split-second later I heard the sharp report of a musket. I broke into a hobbling run. My eyes flickered over the rocky ground as I searched for any obstacle that might ensnare me and slow my descent.

After several minutes, I turned around, trying to see if they were in sight, and my foot caught a root overhanging a badger's den, twisting it. My body lurched forward. In terror, I clawed at the earth as I fell, then gasped as my face struck the soil.

With my face pressed to the ground, I breathed in deeply; the dark earth smelled of loam and dead vegetation, a rich, heavy scent that invigorated me. That weak and human desire to live that we all share, could not bear the thought of leaving all that I treasured and never seeing or feeling the beauty of God's creation. I dragged myself to my feet and ran with renewed strength. Bitter tears flowed from my eyes as I begged God for the strength to make it to the river.

Events that led to this moment raced through my mind. I remembered signing up for the Confederate Army at 17. I had hoped the peach fuzz that encircled my boyish face would pass for a scraggly beard and lend age to my appearance. I could see myself marching in the ranks of gray-clad, all of us believing in our cause and the invincibility of our forces. God stood with us; how could any stand against us? Oh, how I yearned for the glory of those lost days.

Ever since Grant had taken charge of the Union forces, I wondered if God had turned his back on the South. Defeat after defeat had plagued our armies. We fought for our God-given right to life and for our right to the sovereignty of statehood. Why would God desert us when we fought against such a tyrant as Lincoln? How could God allow this man, who trampled the Constitution, to dominate the glorious South?

My side ached. Breath came unsteadily now. I cried out, "God, you have deserted our cause, but please do not desert me now! I tear off these emblems of a cause which you seem to disdain. I come to you as a man! A lowly man who implores you to shed your infinite mercy upon him. For a man only, not for any cause, please deliver me from the clutches of wicked man!"

In vigorous body and broken spirit I ran on. Even whilst weeping, stumbling, I dreamed of home and Ma and Pa. I thought of the potatoes in the fields, of the cotton rows, and of Mary. She had said she would wait for me. But what good could possibly come of her waiting if I died now? What future would await her if I perished?

Spurred on by a determination which must have come from God, for I can explain it in no other way, I redoubled my speed. Through the trees I could see the river rippling. My pursuers drew closer; I could hear them more clearly than ever, and I could imagine their blue coats brushing through the trees. But it did not matter, for through the trees blazed the beautiful, glorious river. I could see freedom and life in the gentle blue glimmer.

I heard musket fire and the air sang with bullets. But it mattered not, for I broke through the trees. And the river yawned before me, reflecting the midday sun.

I heard a voice cry, "Stop!"

Paying no heed, I jumped and felt the bullet strike my back. And then, in that glorious instant, I knew that my strength came from God, for I felt no pain. God must have shielded me in answer to my prayer. He had shown his mercy and saved my soul from death's clutches.

I felt nothing as I sank into the water. Even as Jonah had come from the depths, so the angel drew me from the waters and onto dry land. My body hovered as I drifted over the ground. Gently, slowly I drifted into slumber in the arms of an angel as it carried me away from the river.



Image Credit: Jessica C., Shi
Village, OH



Diary of Sgt. William Garret: July 27, 1864 Today marks an event that has touched me deeper than any other in this bloody war. After the skirmish this morning, a young Confederate soldier attempted to run rather than surrender. I led my men after him. After a wearying chase, we caught up with him on the shore of a river. Private Wilkes shot the man when he attempted to escape into the river.

Although this may appear a trifling event, especially in light of all that has transpired in this conflict, I shall never forget the look that young man gave me as I pulled him from the water. He looked on me from the soul of a boy who had no understanding of battle or death. Those aspects of this war which I used to prize now strike me to the heart as senseless and vain.

That lad could not have yet had his eighteenth birthday, yet now he lies in a hospital tent, a prisoner of war with a shattered spine. No doubt he does not even know the grave injury he has suffered. I have heard that after the spine snaps, one no longer registers pain. Our camp surgeon says that if by some miracle the lad lives, he will never use his again.

To the casual observer this event must seem trivial. But those eyes ... I cannot forget them. He had the eyes of a child, full of hope and life and so oblivious to their own loss.

How can any man truly wish for this bloody conflict? Who, whether man or monster, sparked this struggle? Can we truly place such value on the operation of Government as to slaughter our own brethren? Why must that boy die? What girl now sit alone and mourn him? Will his parents stare at the empty field where he used to help work the soil? Should so many now feel anguish for the loss of that young life? How can anyone draw purpose from anything in this hell called war?

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